

Study 12

Gospel for the Pagans

Acts 14

INTRODUCTION

Paul and Barnabus now travel to Iconium, about 100 miles southeast of Pisidian Antioch. Here we begin to see a key pattern of Pauline ministry. He always chose the largest and most strategic cities in any new region. He would begin a work and from there work outward. Iconium was a prosperous commercial city on a major east-west trade route. (Today it is called Konya, Turkey's fourth largest urban area.) Lystra, for example, was a smaller town and it had a less educated and sophisticated population.

1 vv.1-7. What were the three main stages of the work at Iconium? What lessons do we learn for our own ministry?

v.1 – In the first stage of the work, Paul and Barnabus go “*as usual*” into the Jewish synagogue to preach the gospel. They were so effective that many believed, both Jew and Gentile. We can expect that the gospel message would have been similar to the one Paul delivered in chapter 13, assuming the Bible as an authority and assuming an acquaintance with Biblical themes and morality.

vv.2-5 – In the second stage of the work, they preached outside of the synagogue, in the face of strong opposition, during a period of rising tensions and animosities. On the one hand their ministry was characterized by: a) preaching a “*message of his grace*” (i.e.the gospel), which was b) very bold, c) accompanied by authenticating miracles, d) over a significant period of time. On the other hand, a group of Jews from the synagogue stirred up increasing opposition during this whole stretch, until finally there was a plot to kill them the missionaries.

vv.6-7 – Having already planted a church in Iconium, Paul and Barnabus now removed to the nearby cities of Lystra and Derbe. As mentioned in

the introduction, these were smaller places, and lacked the sophistication of the big metropolis. “*The local Lycaonians were largely uneducated, even illiterate.*” (Stott, p.230).

Some of the lessons we can learn: a) In general, the greater the effectiveness of a ministry the greater the resistance and opposition. We see a note in v.1 about how Paul and Barnabus were especially effective in their ministry in Iconium. Thus the reaction is swift and severe. We cannot infer that this is an absolute rule, but it fits as a general principle. b) Our words must be backed up with deeds. Because of the opposition, God gave the missionaries an especially effective ministry of miracles (v.3) which were ordinarily healings. In the same way, we must be able to show the power of Christ to heal and help people. Changed lives and ministries to psychological, social, and material needs — these all “back up” the preaching of the gospel and authenticate it. c) In general, we see that miracles in the Bible are not random magic tricks, but always closely connected to authenticating the preaching of the word in a new region or place. It means that we should not expect to see miracles distributed everywhere and anywhere in the Christian church. d) We see that the gospel is essentially a “*message of grace*” (v.3). e) Even when the opposition seems to have stopped a ministry, God uses events to spread the gospel into new places (v.6-7).

2. vv.8-15a. What does the crowd’s reaction to the healing of the crippled man tell us about them?

Educated people have a tendency to be skeptical of miracles, the supernatural, and religion, so often the uneducated have an great deal of belief and even obsession with such things. (This reminds us of C.S.Lewis’ warning that there are too opposite errors to be made about demons — to disbelieve in them entirely, or to have an unhealthy fascination and over-interest in them. We could call one super-stition [“over-belief”] and one sub-stition [“under-belief”].

The crowd’s reaction is extreme and fanatical. They cry out in Lyconian (v.11), meaning that these are not the leading Roman citizens (who would have spoken Latin) nor are they educated people (who would have spoken some kind of Greek, the language of cosmopolitan culture). These are “common people”, and the miracle creates a sensation. They quickly

assume that Paul and Barnabus are gods come to earth. “*Local legend told of earlier occasions when the gods had come down to them in the likeness of men... Ovid tells a story of... Philemon and Baucis who entertained Zeus and Hermes unaware and were rewarded...*” (F.F.Bruce, p.291). Having heard legends such as this, the people wanted the rewards that would result in honoring gods in their midst.

All this shows that these were not educated, secularized pagans, but common, semi-literate, superstitious pagans. Thus when we see Paul’s gospel presentation, we will be able to contrast it to that of his presentation to religious and educated people in the synagogue (Acts 13:16ff.)

Note: It is likely that Paul and Barnabus did not understand at first that the crowd thought they were gods, because they cried out in Lycaonian (v.11), a dialect with which they were probably unfamiliar. That explains why the talk had progressed to the offering of sacrifices to them (v.13) before they seemed to realize what was happening (v.14-15a).

3. vv.15-17. Though this is a brief summary of Paul’s talk, compare it to the talk in Acts 13:16ff. How is it different from that talk and why? To what kind of person would Paul bring such a message today?

First, they were different in the citations of authority for its argument or “case”. In Acts 13 he appealed to two authorities recognized by the audience: the Scripture and John the Baptist. But in Acts 14, these pagans do not know or trust the Hebrew Bible. So Paul appeals to what they can see about the natural world around them. First he points to the greatness of creation to show them that this indicates a Creator God (“*God, who made the heaven and earth and sea and everything in them*” – v.16). Then he points to the greatness of “providence”, how in the midst of the immense forces of nature, they nevertheless are given food and “joy” — they are given what is necessary for life. In other words, Paul does not reason from the Scripture (called “special revelation” by the theologians), but from what people can see about the nature of the world and life (called “general” revelation). Essentially, Paul reasons like this: “Look at this and this and that about the world and your life. I can account for them — these things are there because there is a God who made and manages

everything in the universe.”

Second, they were different in the emphasis and time spent on points of gospel content. It is hard to miss that the Acts 13 speech talked little about the nature of God and much about the person and work of Christ. In Acts 14 all the stress is on the nature of God. Paul shows that there are not many gods — each of whom has limited regions and specific ranges of power — but only one God who made everything (v.15), and who has absolute power over everything (v.17). This “abstract” of the speech shows that Paul did allude to Christ, when he said, “*in the past, he let all nations go their own way*” (v.16). This means that now something momentous has occurred. In 17:30-31, we see Paul saying, “*in the past, God overlooked such ignorance... but now he commands all people everywhere to repent... by the man he has appointed.*” Just as in Acts 17, he probably spoke about one who God had sent into this world. In summary, Paul in Acts 13 could assume that they knew who God was in general, and he could focus on the features of Jesus. But in Acts 14, has to spend more time laying a foundation of the nature of God, and gives less time to develop the work of Christ.

Third, they were different in the specifics of the final appeal. In Acts 13, the people are told to stop relying on the law for their justification with God, and look to the work of Christ (13:39). This is “the gospel for moral people”. Paul is saying, “sin makes you imperfect, unjustified — receive Jesus for forgiveness.” In Acts 14, however, the people are told to stop worshipping “*worthless things*” (v.15), or idols. The word translated “*worthless*” means “vain, ineffective”. The people are told to stop serving false gods that cannot satisfy. This is “the gospel for immoral people”. Paul is saying, “sin makes you a slave, in bondage and unfulfilled — receive Christ for reality and freedom.” Paul characterizes God as “*living*” (v.15) as opposed to the deadness of their false gods; he identifies God as the source of “*joy*” (v.17) as opposed to the vanity of their false gods.

To whom would Paul make such a talk today? It would be appropriate for very irreligious people, and especially the more immoral and less educated types. Why? a) Such people cannot be talked to from the Scripture, b) they are very aware of being in bondage to various false gods (through addictions, habits they cannot break, etc.), c) and they need

to have God pointed to as more powerful than their bondages (v.15) and as the source of the joy they seek (v.17). With secular people we have to begin with “where people are” — to find out what we see about the world and life that they “see” too. For example, secular people “see” that human beings have value, but they cannot account for it, unless they acknowledge God as the source of it. In other words, we will have to reason as Paul did. We may start with the human longing for love and community, for personal significance and meaning, for freedom. In any case, we will then point to Christ who is both the explanation and the solution for everything we see.

4. vv.15-17. How is the talk in Acts 13:16ff the same as the speech to the Lycoanians? What can we learn from the comparison and contrast of the two speeches?

John Stott says that every gospel presentation in Acts has four parts: gospel events (what happened), gospel promises (what they bring), gospel witnesses (why its true), and gospel conditions (what to do). In some sense, Paul adapts everyone of the four parts according to the capacities of the audience. But in particular, the “gospel witnesses” are the most affected and changed by the change in listener. The authorities appealed to and the arguments in Acts 13 and 14 are completely different. There is no reference to Scripture in Acts 14 at all.

However, though couched in different language, the core of the gospel is very evident in both speeches. Both tell about a God who is powerful and good (13:16-22; 14:17). Both tell the hearers that they are trying to save themselves and in the wrong way. (The religious try to justify themselves with the law — 13:39, while the pagans worship false gods and idols — 14:15.) Both tell the hearers that God has done something in history to change how we approach him (13:23; 14:16). Both tell the hearers to turn from the old way and turn to God through the new. In short, the gospel is about how all human beings seek to save themselves, but how the true God sent Jesus into the world to save us instead.

Paul does not “change” the gospel, but only “adapts it”. And this is the very key to effective ministry. If we never adapt the gospel, we will be completely ineffective. Like Paul, we must deeply discern the particular beliefs, hopes, aspirations, fears, prejudices, and wisdom of others or we

our gospel communication will seriously miss the mark. But if we change or lose the basics of the gospel, we will also be completely ineffective. Like Paul, we must not shrink from declaring that there is only one true God, that every single person (no matter how nice and good) is sinfully trying to be his or her own Lord and Savior, that Jesus was really divine and human, that he died in our place and was raised bodily from the dead. These basic truths and “events” are non-negotiable. To alter or omit any of them leads to the loss of distinctive Christianity.

5. vv.21-28. Make a list of all the principles of “follow-up” and ministry that Paul and Barnabus followed after the many were converted. Were you properly “followed up”? Do you properly “follow up”?

When Paul and Barnabus saw a large crowd of new converts (v.21) they followed a very careful pattern to establish these people in the faith and get them on a path to growth.

a) First, they retraced their steps to the cities of that region and laid down a layer of “*encouragement*” (v.22). Remember how Barnabus did this to the new converts at Syrian Antioch in Acts 12. This encouraging is here given some content. They told them, “*it is through many hardships that we enter the kingdom of God*” (v.23). We said in a previous study that “encouraging” is more like counseling than teaching. Here we see Paul obviously talking about his own severe sufferings of which all the new converts were aware. He had been stoned and left for dead (v.19); he was in constant danger. But Paul explained how such sufferings only brought the kingly power of Christ more into his life (v.22; cf. II Cor.1:3ff.; 4:16-18). This personal sharing prepared the converts for endurance. He gave them a theology of suffering and a model for it. No one is ready for the Christian life without these!

b) Second, they did not only do this “counseling”, but they were “*strengthening the disciples... to remain true to the faith.*” (v.22) Several other places in the Bible, this term — “the faith” — is used to show that there was a set and recognizable body of basic beliefs that the new converts were being schooled in. The apostolic faith as passed on and taught to each new believer.

c) Third, Paul and Barnabus “*appointed elders for each church...*” (v.23). This means two things:

- . (1) They gave the new churches leadership teams. They identified persons among the new converts who had leadership gifts, and they set them apart and gave them authority in the new churches. Notice that they appointed elders — *plural*. They did not set up individuals, but teams of pastors. The team approach to leadership is a very good quality control. Instead of some individuals with all the power, leaders could hold each other accountable. From I Timothy 3 and Titus 1, we know that these teams were likely to have included elders, deacons, and deaconesses-- some of which part-time and others full-time. (This likely differed with the size of the congregation.)
- . (2) They entrusted the churches to God. This shows a remarkable amount of trust by the missionaries in the new Christians and especially in God. They “*committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.*” (v.23) Thus Paul and Barnabus showed a willingness to lose personal control of the churches. They did not hold on to their power.

d) Fourth, Paul and Barnabus returned to their sponsoring church in Antioch, where they reported and encouraged them greatly with the news (v.26-28).

Communicating the gospel with Non Christians

BRIDGE BUILDING

1. Building trust.

According to Aristotle, persuasive people combine three different factors in themselves. "*Logos*" means they are able to demonstrate clear and persuasive reasons for what they believe. They show how their minds were changed. But on its own, "*Logos*" will not persuade, since is rationality is only one aspect of human nature. "*Pathos*" means they show

are able to demonstrate both a passion and a compassion as they communicate what they believe. Thus they demonstrate how their hearts were changed. Finally, "*Ethos*" means that they are able to demonstrate attitudes and a lifestyle consistent with what they believe. They show how their life was changed. Persuasion involves appeals to reason, emotion, and experience. Persuasive people earn trust by their thoughtfulness, warmth, and integrity.

Thus the Christian develops redemptive relationships of active listening, service, authenticity and consistency. This takes time but it creates openness to the message when it comes from you. Through discussions and interaction, the Christian discerns "themes of relevance" (see below) — things that are burning issues for the non-Christian.

2. Identifying themes of relevance.

A theme of relevance is some true concern or conviction which arises from the person's creation in the image of God. The Christian makes contact with the knowledge of God which every non-Christian has (Rom.1:18-21). Apologetics recognizes that non-Christians do know the truth about God, but it is intellectually and emotionally repressed. The Christian makes contact with the image of God which every non-Christian has (Gen.1:27). Apologetics recognizes that non-Christians' deepest longings demonstrate the absence of God in a heart that was designed for him. We were created to be rational, relational, creative, eternal. And a person fears death, treats love as a reality, and longs for justice and freedom even when his/her world view can neither explain or satisfy those impulses.

What are examples of "themes of relevance"? These are the person's greatest hopes, fears, aspirations. There are two basic categories of them. There are Life Priorities, and Life Problems. Life Priorities include *Major job and vocational issues* ("My job isn't fulfilling, I don't know if I want to spend my life on this"); *Overall life goals* ("In my life I want to accomplish..."); *Heroes and ideas* ("The person/idea that influences me most..."); *Analysis of world problems* ("I think the problem with our society is..."); *Love and marriage* ("Marriage isn't for me..."). Life Problems include *Guilt or anger about the past* ("I regret... I have trouble with"); *Anxiety and fears about the future* ("I am very worried about...");

Boredom or frustration with the present (“Nothing tastes...”) *Ethical dilemmas* (“I don't know what the right thing to do is...”)

3. Identifying belief position

A “belief position” is what the person consciously believes about theological and religious issues. This includes what they believe about God, about Jesus, about life after death, about human nature, and so on. But a person’s essential belief position can be ascertained by looking at these basic questions. *God’s nature*. (“I think God is...”) *Human nature*. (“What I think is basically wrong with people... (or) what I think is the reason most people are unhappy...”) *Moral order*. (“I think that the way to determine right and wrong is...”) *Spiritual meaning*. (“I think what would ultimately fulfill me...”)

You will discover two basic kinds of non-believers — those who subscribe to the basic beliefs of the Christian faith, but have not understood or “grasped” the gospel. They are trying to save themselves by being good. These people are not very secular, and generally you can simply demonstrate the case for relevance with a personal testimony, and go immediately to the full content of the gospel (there is seldom a need to make a case for credibility). But in NYC, most people will be more secular, and will reject most or all basic Christian doctrines. Therefore you need to identify their belief position, and make the case for relevance as in #4 below.

4. Arousing interest.

a. Show tension between their theme and their belief.

The fundamental way to arouse interest in the gospel is to show a person a tension between their themes of relevance (which reveals their primal understanding that there is a God) and their belief position (which expresses their conscious denial of the Biblical God.)

b. Relate a brief presentation of the gospel to their theme.

Once you have pointed out some tension between the person’s concern or conviction and his or her belief position, make a brief presentation of the gospel in such a way that shows how it addresses the person’s “theme”.

Case History

Sanjay Singh is a well to do businessman who owns a private equity company which had been doing well till recently. The election of Donald Trump had resulted and massive outflows of foreign funds from the Malaysian market back to the USA. His clients are fast liquidating their positions and the ringgit is plumbing new lows every day. Oil prices are still at their lowest in decades and the political situation is dire. He returns home very worried every day and on top of his worries is the fact that a lot of his investments have been in shipping companies which are now at all time lows due to fierce competition with much reduced volumes and hence low freight charges. He worries about being able to provide for his two daughters Mina and Misha, the eldest of whom is soon to go to Sydney to do Medicine which was the fulfillment of her dreams. Misha is in a very expensive international school and will need to further her studies overseas too in 2 years. The mortgage on their Damansara Heights house is also crushing. He had so many dreams of being able to establish a successful private equity company after years working at Boston Consulting for 10 years. He had a broken marriage due to the long hours he had spent at work. He had hoped to marry someone who will love his girls and understand his life style.

He comes from a Hindu family background but rarely goes to Temple and believes vaguely that there is a god but he is not sure what kind. There is a loose belief in reincarnation which then causes him to live a moral life as he does not want to come back as a low level insect as a consequence. He has led a life of integrity and has never cheated in his business dealings and being a very clever man who graduated from Harvard he has always believed that success is based on his efforts. However due to factors completely outside his control his world is falling apart.

He should be having good karma as he had lived a good life ..what is happening? He is so troubled. He is thinking of taking his clients monies

out of the country and running away in order to save his family

1. What are examples of Sanjay Singh's themes of relevance

2. What are his basic beliefs

3. How do his basic beliefs run into conflict with his themes of relevance?

4. How then can you bring in the gospel to him in a relevant fashion?